

JOY, SORROW AND PRIDE AT A PAWNEE REBURIAL

“Old Ones, I want to speak to you. I am Pawnee. My grandparents were Pawnees. I am Skidi and Chaui. I speak for the Pawnee people. We’re glad that you are home. We are sorry that you have had to be gone so long. It hurt us to know that you were in museums. It hurt us to know that you were away from the Pawnees.

“We don’t live here anymore. We live in Oklahoma. All our people are there. We are well. It is a good home. But this is Pawnee land. This is our home too. Our people walked here a long time ago. We walk here again. We look and see our people. We listen and hear them speaking. This is our home.

“We want you to rest here. You won’t be disturbed anymore. God has brought you here. Old Ones, you are home. It is good. We are happy.”

The above prayer was given in the Pawnee tongue by a young man Warren Pratt, grandson of Adam Pratt and Lawrence Good Fox, both much-respected elders of the Pawnee Nation, as he stood over the large grave prepared for the reburial of Pawnee remains. The remains were returned from museums and other collections pursuant to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). The reburial took place October 18th at a location in east central Nebraska, on ancestral homelands recently repatriated to the Pawnee Tribe.

Pawnee holy man Ronnie Good Eagle performed the traditional blessing and cedaring, and from the large pan holding the embers the smoke flowed into the grave, then up into the sky like the spirits rising to freedom. The delegation from the Tribe included tribal elder and repatriation officer Francis Morris and tribal President George Howell. Representing the Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs was Judi gaiashkibos, the organization’s Executive Director. The ceremony was not open to the public, and approximately 25 people were in attendance.

At the graveside, several people spoke of their feelings of sorrow for those whose spirits were held captive by researchers and curious collectors, and joy at seeing and participating in solemn ceremony to bring them home and free their spirits. Pat Leading Fox, head of the Chiefs Council and Chief of the Skidi, spoke his feelings. He is a large man, a police chief who directed the events surrounding the ceremony. He spoke haltingly as he told of helping prepare the remains for burial the night before, and of holding the skull of a child.

I was privileged to witness the ceremony, and being the only Lakota there, to speak on behalf of Lakota people in sharing the joy at the freeing of the spirits of those people whom the remains represented. It was a moving ceremony, one I shall never forget.

Later, at a meal following the ceremony, my Hochunk brother, Louie LaRose, told of preparing other repatriated Pawnee remains for reburial several years before. Those remains were from a museum and were removed from plastic bags in which they were stored. The bags were numbered with codes that would tell a researcher the gender, age, and other facts that could be discerned, as well as the geographic coordinates of the location where the bones were unearthed. Very movingly, Louie told of his feelings at the time, of deep sorrow that those individuals had names, loving names that told of exploits, of lineage, and of endearment; and those names were obliterated and replaced by cold numbers.

I found myself drained and exhausted when I returned home that evening, as did my wife, Anne, who attended with me. But I felt a sense of joy, gratitude and pride over a certain element of the reburial ceremony -- the fact that the 56 acres of earth made sacred by the remains of their ancestors, was repatriated to the Pawnee Tribe by Roger Welsch and his wife, Linda.

The acreage is part of the territory of the Pawnee Nation before they were removed to Oklahoma in the late 1800s. It is the first time in 135 years that the Pawnee are back in their ancestral homelands. This acreage and modest farmstead where they live was the Welsch's entire estate, given to the Pawnee with the only provision being that he and Linda be permitted to live out their lives there.

Roger Welsch, some might recall, appeared regularly in his "Postcards from Nebraska" segment of CBS's Sunday Morning show with the late Charles Kuralt. Roger is a noted folklorist, an establishment in Nebraska, and noted beyond its border for his many books and magazine features.

I first met him while I served on the Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs in the early 1990s, at the height of the Pawnee struggle to secure the remains of their ancestors and associated burial goods from the Nebraska State Historical Society. Roger resigned from the NSHS Board in protest -- or as he might say "in disgust," at their refusal to deal honorably or even discuss the issues with the Tribe's representatives. The Tribe was ultimately successful in their legal and political fight, and with much public opinion on their side. With the help of the Native American Rights Fund, their victory set the stage for the larger movement that resulted in the enactment of NAGPRA.

Roger is a noted humorist much in demand as a speaker in Nebraska. His humor is a sharp weapon that he uses against bigotry.

In 2005, at the feast and give-away marking the end of the year of mourning of the death of my sister, Shirley Plume, I brought Roger into our family, along with Louie LaRose of the Winnebago, and Nancy Gillis of the Cherokee. In the Hunkapi (making of relatives) ceremony that day, I said this of Roger:

"In Lakota culture as in many Native American societies, the clown is an important member of the clan or band. He brings happiness, and sometimes his humor brings ridicule on anyone who tries to seize power and bully the people.

"The Heyoka is the Lakota clown, a holy man of sorts. Because Roger Welsch uses his humor to give joy and laughter, but also uses it as a weapon in defense of the Indian people and their tribes, and all oppressed people, I give him the name, Heyoka ta Pejuta, Clown Medicine."

Roger Welsch's medicine is powerful, indeed, and his heart is big.

Charles E. Trimble, Oglala Lakota, was born and raised on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. He was principal founder of the American Indian Press Association in 1970, and served as executive director of the National Congress of American Indians from 1972-78. He is retired and lives in Omaha, Nebraska. He may be reached at cchuktrim@aol.com.